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THE WASHER OF THE FORD

In an article in *Modern Language Notes* for June 1918,¹ Prof. G. G. King expresses "the gravest doubt" of the Gaelic origin of certain of the Fiona Macleod writings of William Sharp. Having met the Sin-Eater, the Dark Star, and a supernatural washer-woman in essays on the folk-lore of northwestern Spain, Prof. King suspects that it is such readings as these that William Sharp has Gaelicized and is passing off as Celtic. Prof. King even mentions Thomas Chatterton as a parallel case.

But Chatterton and Macpherson presented themselves as translators. They invited judgment on their works as genuine "antiques." William Sharp makes no such claim. He must be judged as an artist, not as an antiquarian. He does not assert that what he depicts is exclusively Celtic, or even typically so.² He explains that he has interpenetrated Gaelic tradition with his own sentiment and made it serve as a medium for the expression of his personal view of life. To one familiar with Celtic literature this is so obviously true as to need no comment. The Gaelic associations of the Fiona Macleod writings are so numerous that it would require an extensive study to point them out.³ Within the limits of the present article we can do so only to a limited extent. We have therefore chosen to examine the Gaelic tradition of the *Washer of the Ford* and to compare it with the figure in Fiona Macleod's legendary morality of that title.

¹ XXXIII, 354.

² Fiona Macleod, *The Sin Eater*, *The Washer of the Ford*, etc. New York, 1913, p. 8.

³ In an unpublished study by Mr. Mac E. Leach, University of Illinois, A.M. 1917, the following writings of Fiona Macleod are referred to definite written sources. (References are to pages in the *Bibliography of Irish Philology and Literature* by R. I. Best, published by the National Library of Ireland.) *The House of Usna*, based on *Longes mac nUsnig*, B. 92; *The Immortal Hour*, based on *Tochmarc Etaine*, B. 84; *The Laughter of Peterkin*, based on *Aided Chlainne Lir*, B. 82, *Aided Chlainne Tuirenn*, B. 82-3, *Longes mac nUsnig* B. 92. The following writings involve characters familiar in Celtic tradition: *The Sad Queen* (Scathach), cf. *Foglaim Chonculaind*, B. 91; *The Laughter of Scathach the Queen*, cf. *ibid.*; *Harping of Cravetheen* (Cormac), cf. *Togail Bruidne Dá Choca*, B. 98, 99. Mr. Leach's work is incomplete.

The Washer of the Ford appears in the *Destruction of Da Chocha's Hostel*, a tale composed, in its original form, before the tenth century. The story is of the unfortunate Cormac Conlingas, a hero with whose tragic fate, by the way, William Sharp was familiar.⁴ The omens follow one another thick and fast as Cormac presses on to his doom. When his army is about to cross the Ford of Athlone on the way to the battle,

they saw a red woman on the edge of the ford, washing her chariot and its cushions and its harness. When she lowered her hand, the bed of the river became red with gore and blood. But when she raised her hand over the river's edge, not a drop therein but was lifted on high; so that they went dry-foot over the bed of the river.

"Most horrible is what the woman does!" says Cormac. "Let one of you go and ask her what she is doing."

Then someone goes and asked her what she did. And then, standing on one foot, and with one eye closed, she chanted to them, saying:

"I wash the harness of a king who will perish," etc.

The messenger came to Cormac and told him the evil prophecy which the Badb had made for him.

"Apparently thy coming is cause of great evil," says Cormac.

Then Cormac goes to the edge of the ford to have speech with her, and asked her whose was the harness she was a-washing. And then he uttered this lay:

"O woman, what harness wast thou?" etc.

The Badb:

"Thine own harness, O Cormac,

And the harness of thy men of trust," etc.

"Evil are the omens thou askest for us," says Cormac. "Grimly thou chantest to us."⁵

In this account we have practically all the typical features of the Celtic superstition as they recur in less complete form in later writings. The Washer of the Ford is a "Badb," a Celtic war goddess whose office it is to warn the hero when his hour is come.⁶ She is a "red woman,"⁷ symbol of bloody death. She stands at the ford washing gore from a chariot and cushions and harness. The prince does not recognize that it is a phantom chariot, his own. Fascinated by horror he goes to her and asks her whose is

⁴ Cf. Fiona Macleod, *The Harping of Cravetheen* in *The Sin-Eater, The House of Usna* in *Poems and Dramas*.

⁵ *Revue Celtique* XXI, 157.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*, p. 395, notes to §§ 15-17. Cf. also *Rev. Celt.* I, 32-55.

⁷ Cf. "the three reds" in the *Togail Bruidne Dá Chocha, Destruction of Da Chocha's Hostel*, *loc. cit.*

the gear she is washing. In the characteristic attitude of prophecy she foretells his doom.

In the *Great Defeat on the Plain of Muirthemne* the young warrior Cuchulainn on his way to the battle comes similarly upon a supernatural woman washing his gear at a ford. The details are slightly different. This woman is "slender and white of her body, yellow of her hair." The prophecy is not made by the woman herself, but is put into the mouth of the druid Cathbad who accompanies the hero.

"See'st thou not yonder sight? She is Badb's daughter that with woe and mourning washes thy gear, because she signifies thy fall and thy destruction by Meave's great hosting."⁸

But the hero will not desist from his enterprise.

"What though the fairy woman wash my spoils?" he replies. It is his consolation that she will wash the spoils of his enemies also.

In the *Cathreim Thoirdhealbhaigh, Triumphs of Torlough*, written about 1350 by Seean MacCraith, hereditary historion of the O'Briens, the army of Donnchad O'Brien comes to the shore of a lake, and—

There they saw the monstrous and distorted form of a lone ancient hag, that stooped over the bright Lough shore. She was thatched with elf-locks, foxy grey and rough like heather, matted and like long sea-wrack, a bossy wrinkled, ulcerated brow, the hairs of her eyebrows like fish-hooks; bleared watery eyes peered with malignant fire between red inflamed lids; she had a great blue nose, flattened and wide, livid lips, and a stubbly beard. . . The hag was washing human limbs and heads with gory weapons and clothes, till all the lake was defiled with blood and brains and floating hair. Donnchad at last spoke:

"What is your name and race, and whose kin are those maltreated dead?"
"I am Bronach of Burren of the Tuatha Dé Danann. This slaughter-heap is of your army's heads. Your own is in the middle."⁹

The prophecy having been delivered, the strange figure rises and disappears.

In the same account Richard de Clare, the Norman leader, coming to the "running water of the fish-containing Fergus," meets a similar horrible beldame, "washing armour and rich robes till the red gore churned and splashed through her hands." DeClare calls an Irish ally to question her. She declares that the armour

⁸ E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga*, p. 47.

⁹ *Folk Lore* XXI, 188.

and garments she washes are of the Norman host; few of them will escape death.¹⁰

The Washer of the Ford also appears in traditional versions of the death of Ossian's son Oscar. Of these I have noted four from the Scottish Highlands.¹¹ The woman is mentioned as a "Badb." Oscar and his host meet her on their way to battle. They see it is the garments of Oscar she is washing, and the hue of blood is on the water. They are overcome with horror: one of them approaches and questions her:

"O Badbh, that washest the garments,
Make us a prophecy in truth.
Shall a man of them fall by us,
Or shall all of us come to naught?"

The woman answers, prophesying. Oscar is wounded in the battle and meets his death, but according to the Badb's prophecy, nine hundred of his foes are likewise slain.

It is clear from the preceding examples that the Washer of the Ford is a figure connected with strife and battle, and that the garments which she washes are the gear of the doomed warriors who meet her. The prophecy implicit in her action is further expounded in a dialogue between her and the man who is to die.

The superstition survives in Celtic countries at the present time in a more or less corrupt form.¹² Oral tradition in County Clare still preserves the story of De Clare to which we have alluded, and, according to local belief, calamities are still foretold in a similar way.¹³ In Lewis, Uist, and other regions in the Scottish Highlands, the *bean nigheachain*, a tiny washerwoman with red webbed feet, frequents the fords after dark and in the early morn-

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹ J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* III, 322-3ffg, *Leabhar, na Feinne*, p. 182, p. 191; J. G. Campbell, *The Fians*, p. 33.

¹² Cf. J. M. Mackinlay, *Folk Lore of Scottish Lochs*, Glasgow, 1893, page 166. J. G. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* III, 346 cites *Foyer Breton* I, 144 for the *Kannérez-noz*, night washerwomen, a troop of ghosts who appear on certain nights of November. They wash and dry and sew the shrouds of the dead who yet walk and talk. See also P. Sébillot, *Traditions de la haute Bretagne* I, 248 and A. Le Braz, *La Legende de la Mort* I, 52, xlv, II, 214. Cf. Sir Samuel Ferguson, *Congall*,³ 1907, p. 67-70.

¹³ *Folk Lore* XXI, 180, 187-9.

ing, washing clothes of battle. By placing oneself between her and the stream one may obtain answers to questions.¹⁴

The *bean nigheachain*, *bean-nigh* (washer), *nigheag* (little washer), or *nigheag na h-ath* (little washer of the ford)¹⁵ is easily confused with the *caoineag* (weeping woman)¹⁶ and the *banshee*, since all forewarn of death. The Washer of the Ford is sometimes described as singing a dirge at her grisly task.

William Sharp has chosen just such a man to meet the Washer of the Ford as fits the Gaelic tradition. Torcall the Blind Harper is a lover of strife. "His song was . . . of the sword and the war-galley, of the red blood and the white breast, of Odin and Thor and Freya . . . of sudden death in battle, and of Valhalla." He stirs up strife, for the sheer love of strife, among the boatmen who are taking him to the mainland. He can say of himself, "Is it death I am fearing now, I who have washed my hands in blood, and had love, and known all that is given to man?" As we might expect, there is a sense of sin in William Sharp's legendary moralities which is not emphasized in the old versions, but to Torcall as to the older pagan heroes, the sequel of death is oblivion:

Each red soul was seized and thrown into the water of the ford, and when white as a sheep-bone on the hill, was taken in one hand by the Washer of the Ford and flung into the air, where no wind was and where sound was dead, and was then severed this way and that in four whirling blows of the sword from the four quarters of the world. Then it was that the Washer of the Ford trampled upon what fell to the ground, till under the feet of her was only a white sand, white as powder, light as the dust of the yellow flowers that grow in the grass.¹⁷

But blind Torcall has known love, and by that love, still in his heart, he is redeemed. When at last he comes himself bloodstained to the Ford he has sung of, there are two waiting for him beyond, the woman he had loved, and the child she had borne him. It is not the terrible figure of his song that he finds, but a gentle figure with long black hair, and the song that she sings is this:

"Glory to God on high, and to Mary, Mother of Jesus,
Here am I washing away the sins of the shrunken,

¹⁴ *Folk Lore* IX, 91-2; XIV, 380, XXV, 87-88.

¹⁵ A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* II, 226.

¹⁶ A. Carmichael, II, 240. Unlike *nigheag*, *caoineag* cannot be approached or questioned. She is seldom seen but often heard by hill, glen, lake, stream or waterfall. Cf. *Folk Lore* IX, 91-2; XXV, 84-91.

¹⁷ Fiona Macleod, *The Sin Eater*, etc., p. 169-170.

O Torcall of Lochlin, throw off the red sins that ye cherish,
And I will be giving you the washen shroud that they wear in Heaven.”¹⁸

It is Mary Magdeline, symbol supreme of repentance. His eyes have been purged of their blindness; his heart is led by the sad song of the dead woman and the cry of her child. A prayer comes of his heart at the sound, and he weeps for pity. “Which is best, O Torcall,” this Washer asks him, “the sword or peace?” The hard stubborn heart is softened at last, and he answers “Peace.”

“Take your harp,” Mary said, “and go unto the Ford. But lo, now I clothe you with a white shroud. And if you fear the drowning flood, follow the bells that were your tears; and if the dark affright you, follow the song of prayer that came out of your heart.”¹⁹

In this second vision of Torcall’s, the pagan figure has become a symbol of Christian promise. The writer has handled the legend with great freedom, but the lineaments of the Gaelic tradition are discernible. Throughout, the Washer of the Ford is peculiarly the Weird of men that love battle and strife; the garments that she washes are the gear of the doomed warriors who meet her; the prophecy implicit in her action is further expounded in a dialogue between her and the man who is to die.

The figure of the Sin-Eater is familiar in India and Turkistan,²⁰ and there are spirit-women that wash clothes in the moonlight on river banks in the folk-lore of many countries.²¹ William Sharp who was an omniverous reader, may have been acquainted with such beliefs from the essays which Prof. King cites and from many other sources as well as from Gaelic tradition. It would seem gratuitous to doubt, however, that he heard of the Washer of the Ford where he says he heard of her, in the highlands and islands of Scotland which know her still and which he surely knew. He heard of her no doubt only as the vague prophetess we have in-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁰ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*,³ IX, *The Scapegoat*, p. 43-6.

²¹ For France, cf. Sébillot, *Le Folk-Lore de France*. See Index s.v. lavan-dières de nuit; *Folk Lore* XI, 426; G. Sand, *Legendes rustiques*, p. 30; Laisnel de la Salle, Le Berry (Les littératures populaires XL), p. 140. For Korea, cf. *Folk Lore* XI, 332. “There are spirits too about rivers that take various shapes, commonly that of a woman washing clothes in the moonlight.” These traditions do not retain, if they ever possessed, the distinctive features which we have enumerated of the Gaelic Washers of the Ford. For the figure of the Sin Eater, cf. G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts*, p. 84.

dicated, "a dim ancestral figure of awe haunting a shadowy stream in a shadowy land." Even among the most erudite of Celtic scholars the Badb is hardly more—a name in a few ancient texts or on a crumbling stone.²²⁻²³

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²² Hennessy, *Rev. Celt.* I, 32-57.

²³ After this article was in press I noted the following allusion to the Mórrígan (*i. e.* the Badb) in the eighth century *Reicne Fothaid Canainne* (*Fianagecht* ed. K. Meyer, p. 16):

Horrible are the huge entrails which the Mórrígan washes.
From the edge of a spear she came to us; 'tis she that egged us on.
Many are the spoils she washes, terrible the hateful laughs he laughs.
She has flung her mane over her back;—it is a stout heart that will
not quail before her.